# PART TWELVE

## *Church networks*

One of the greatest barriers to the revival of the Church in Britain, Europe and other parts of the world today is the wrong concept of 'church' held by many. In Parts Three and Four of this book, we examined the meaning of two important words the New Testament uses to describe the Church. The Bible teaching is clear, but erroneous ideas are so deeply embedded in our minds, and so much a part of our traditional experience of church, that we find it very difficult to understand and apply this teaching. Jesus' words about our traditions emptying God's Word of its power in Matthew 15:1-10, are never more relevant than when we think about church today. Through our wrong concepts of church, we limit our effectiveness and hinder our ability to build strong and effective churches today.

Many people refer to such concepts as 'local church,' 'national church' or 'denominational church,' but, as we saw in Part Three, rarely do these concepts carry the true biblical meaning of 'church.'

# 'CHURCH' IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

We have seen that the New Testament uses the word 'church' in three main ways:

- To describe all believers both on earth and in heaven – the *universal Church*
- To describe the household church – the *community church*
- To refer to believers of a specific city or locality – the *city church*.

Each of these expressions of church is important and must have a place in our thinking and practice today. The *universal Church* is a reminder that there is only one true Church and Body of Christ, which consists of all believers of all history. This will only be fully manifested when all God's people will be gathered together in heaven. It is a reminder that we all belong to each other and to the Lord.

The *community church* is witnessed to in Scripture in only a handful of verses such as Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19 & Philemon 2, and yet, it is an extremely important part of our understanding and expression of church. The household in the society of New Testament times was not the same as the typical nuclear family household of today. It was a thriving community, almost a village in itself. It is clear from this that God intends church to operate fully at every level of society penetrating into even the smallest of communities.

This community understanding of church has some obvious advantages. Close-knit relationships and a sense of belonging flourish through this emphasis on local, people group communities. Both rural villages and urban communities, found in their specific locality within large cities, must have credible expressions of church at their level of community.

What we describe as 'local churches' today resembles more closely these community churches (household churches) of the New Testament. It is where we are strong today. But, our weakness lies in seeking to express everything that the Bible says about church through these community-style churches. The community church without the New Testament expression of the *city church* is but a fragmented expression of what the Bible reveals about church. As we described in Part Three, the city church of the New Testament consisted of many of these localised, community churches expressing themselves as the church of that city or area.

# THE MYTH OF INDEPENDENCE

We also saw in Part Three that what we commonly call a 'local church' today is inconsistent with the revelation of the New Testament. The local churches of the New Testament (such as the churches of Jerusalem, Ephesus, Corinth and Antioch) were expressions of the body of Christ in a city or area. They were not single, independent congregations but more like a *network* of congregations functioning interdependently as one church. This is the principle underlying the concept of *church networks*. You cannot have an independent local congregation any more than you can have an independent hand or foot. Together, they form one body.

The choice in the New Testament is never between local congregations or city-wide churches, between small or large – but all these things should be working together with each element in its proper place. This is the only way we can have a real spiritual impact on our towns, cities and nations.

What most people speak of a 'local church' today, they have in mind a single congregation with a pastor, a leadership team, a building to meet in, and a local area to claim as its own. But, this leads to a serious departure from the New Testament when people see this traditional model of the 'local church' as the only real and legitimate expression of church today. Consequently, they build small, isolated and narrow-focussed congregations claiming to be the body of Christ in their area. They pay little or no attention to their brothers and sisters

in other 'local churches' except for a few pulpit courtesies, some token fraternal activities and perhaps also their denominational affiliation. Apart from these things, they see themselves as 'independent churches' holding a direct relationship with the government of Christ and claiming full sovereignty as 'local churches'. Few attitudes can be fracturing the body of Christ more than this. Real unity will only be seen when all the congregations of a town or city see themselves as part of the same body of Christ.

# THE NETWORK CHURCH

The network church concept rejects the narrow, inward-looking tendency of so many small so-called 'local churches' we see today with their 'village mentality'. These churches tend to be small, parochial and inwardly focussed. Network churches, on the other hand, will seek to grow to become many thousands of people, with a city-wide and expansive mentality and will be characterised by an *outward focus*.

Local churches today tend to be mono-cultural, but the network church will incorporate all the various cultural, racial, language and people groupings often found in today's society and express these through a *multicultural* approach to church.

The village-minded church is usually strong on fellowship and pastoral care and is often led by a one or (at the most) a two-fold ministry – that of the pastor-teacher. But, the network church upholds the *five-fold ministry* seeing the importance of the apostolic and prophetic in the government of the church.

The village-minded church sees itself as an independent whole rather than one part of the whole, needing to be integrated into the bigger picture of the network church. On the other hand, the network church consists of *interdependent parts* working together in connection with the whole. The network church philosophy is an inclusive and expansive approach to church which seeks to recognise all expressions of the Body of Christ in the city or locality.

# THE MEGA CHURCH

From about the 1980's, beginning in North America, a new form of church began to be seen which was, in part, a reaction against the 'local, village church' approach. The 'mega church' phenomenon took America by storm as churches of many thousands began to be seen in one major city after another.

But these churches didn't really express church in the fullness of the New Testament revelation. The difference was simply in the size and influence of the particular church in question. It still was about 'your church' and 'my church' but the difference was simply that mega churches were bigger than most local, village-type churches. The mega churches of the 1980's grew big through 'church growth' principles rooted more in sociology than genuine spirituality. Characteristically, they were headed up by high-powered, charismatic leaders who had great management skills and were backed by tightly-controlled leadership teams – often consisting of family members. The philosophy was 'big is beautiful' and all that seemed to matter was the growth of their church. Everything was done with the single aim of furthering this goal. It was a 'no-holds-barred' approach to church growth.

The fact that at the end of the 1980's there were no more Christians in the USA than at the beginning, showed that the mega church phenomenon was more successful in drawing from the pool of existing believers than it was about the real work of Christ: making, maturing and mobilising new disciples for the Master.

Now in the 21st Century, we must be concerned not just to see churches grow, but also to ensure that every Christian is fully trained, equipped and mobilised. We have witnessed in recent decades the phenomenon of fast-growing churches building their numbers by competing with other churches through high-profile speakers, popular sermon topics and famous Christian 'entertainers'. But our concern should be for genuine New Testament Christianity, which has much more to do with high-cost discipleship than the promotion of crowd-pulling programmes or personalities. The network church concept is best described as building 'meta churches' and not the traditional mega church of recent years.

# THE META CHURCH

A 'meta church' is also a church of many thousands but shaped by a different philosophy of church from the mega church we have been describing. A meta church has an integrated approach to church which expresses itself through a network of many cells, congregations and ministries which enables the whole body to function fully.

In the same way we compared and contrasted the village church and the network church approaches, we can also highlight the differences between the mega church and meta church. The mega church usually has a mono-structural organisation, with all departments and ministries of the church relating directly to the senior leader through line managers. The meta church, on the other hand, is a *network structure* of churches, cells and ministries and has a releasing rather than a regulating approach to leadership. Consequently it has a more open and less managerial style of church government.

Mega churches see mobilisation consisting of members serving the programme of the church, but meta churches see *service as the programme* of the church. The emphasis of a mega church is on the 'big building' where everything of real significance takes place. The meta church, however, emphasises the need for the members to be the church wherever they are and buildings are merely a means to that end.

Meta churches put people before programmes and this is most evident in the cells. The cells are not just part of the programme of the church, but they are where the members are trained, equipped and released for the work of the church. The meta church upholds an *every member ministry* and sees the leadership's role as primarily to equip the saints for the work of the ministry – making, maturing and mobilising disciples, according to Matthew's Gospel chapter 28.

Meta churches understand mobilisation to be preparing God's people for mission. The meta church approach is a *discipleship* approach to church and is based on servanthood. Mega church

strategies can at times foster a competitive consumer approach to Christianity. Following the motto, 'bigger is better', mega churches can often appear as if their ultimate goal is merely to grow bigger rather than to produce disciples and to release people into the ministry of Christ.

Mega churches are usually anti-denominational with very few of them working within traditional denominational structures. Their sheer size can breed a spirit of superiority and independence. But those involved in meta churches understand the principle of networking and can easily extend that principle in order to embrace *national and international* networks.

Network churches hold the *balance between central direction and local initiative*. They enjoy the fact that they are both big and yet honeycombed into a myriad of different components – cells, congregations and ministries – through which people can be pastored, nurtured and mobilised within the context of a sense of real belonging but, at the same time, stand with the thousands in the great convocations and celebrations in the mass meetings. However, most important of all, network churches prize and value every individual member who is not merely a 'pew-warmer' or 'sermon-fodder', but a person with powerful potential. Network churches see their role as bringing out that potential and releasing it in the power of Christ to see his Great Commission fulfilled.

All these differences – between village-type churches and city churches, and between mega churches and meta churches - have helped us understand how the Lord wants churches to organise themselves and to grow as credible witnesses to Christ. This form of church expression could become an effective common model for church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## THE STRENGTH OF NETWORKING

Christians are surely stronger when they stand and work together. This means being tolerant of the different doctrinal emphases found outside their own particular group as well as providing a loving defence of the essential fundamental doctrines of the faith found in the Bible. There can be no real unity based on compromising these foundational truths.

We deal with this principle in more detail in Part Thirteen in this book.

The promise of Psalm 133 is given to brothers *dwelling together in unity* and we are told that this is where 'the Lord commands the blessing.' This promise should encourage every single Christian church, leader and ministry to consider the importance of networking. God never intended that we should 'go it alone' or that we should faction ourselves off from the rest of the body of Christ. Church networks are an important way of overcoming the destructive independent tendencies that lie at the root of fallen sinful nature. Separatist attitudes should never be allowed to enter the life of the Church. Our task is too urgent and the world is too lost. We simply must demonstrate to the nations the reality of a united body of Christ present and active in our locality, our nation and across the nations of the world.

## NETWORK CHURCHES TODAY

In applying the New Testament networking principle, we must be clear that it is not possible to turn the clock back to New Testament times. 2,000 years of Church history have left us with more than 6,000 denominations, with many other independent church groups, streams and traditions in existence today. But if Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17 is to be answered, each church group must see themselves as part of the greater whole – members of Christ's body and not independent units separated from other church groups.

One way of doing this is through networking. A network is a real and tangible expression of interdependence and interconnectedness. Churches can network locally and nationally and can also be part of denominational and inter-denominational networks. At the heart of the network philosophy lie the principles of humility and acceptance. That is, the willingness to see that 'our group' is not the totality of the body of Christ on earth, and that we are all inter-connected parts of the greater whole. In short, we need each other. As John puts it in 1 John 1:3, 'Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.' This universal fellowship must necessarily involve partnership in the common vision to make Christ known to the world. Networks can operate both formally and informally, and can be both non-governmental and governmental in structure.

*Non-governmental* networks include both informal and formal network structures which honour the identity and integrity of local churches, while providing the framework for wider consultation, planning, action and vision.

Network churches are *governmental* structures and normally seek to develop all the characteristics of a network church within a city or a geographical region. It is interesting to note that the New Testament never uses the word 'church' in a national or international context. While national and international networks may be helpful in giving teaching, encouragement and apostolic direction to local churches, they should never become their governing authority. The network church, however, will have a governmental structure within its own city or region. In a network church:

- The parts will be formally constituted to form an expression of a city or a regional church operating according to the network principle

- They will usually be linked to apostolic leadership which gives shape and direction to the whole

- The leadership will be drawn from each constituent part incorporating the five-fold ministry of Ephesians 4:11

- They will embrace expressions of *ekklesia* at every level, from the twos and threes of companionship groups, to the convocation gatherings of the whole network church

- The network church will itself form links with other groups and churches both in their area and beyond, expressing their full unity in Christ.

Building church networks today according to the meta church model is as desirable as it is necessary. However, we must never underestimate the challenge and the cost involved in following this path. For the most part, this involves laying aside completely the traditional models of church which are being followed without question in so many places today. The following principles serve as a summary of the principles of network churches and present the challenge of the Holy Spirit to the churches of today:

- Absolute submission to Christ as Head of the Church and the willingness to function, as members of his body, solely according to his direction

- Resisting the traditional church leadership model of 'pastor-teacher' and accepting the five-fold ministry in the leadership and direction of the whole network church

- Rejecting the ministry as a profession or a career for some who do the work of Christ on behalf of the members of his body

- Accepting the principle that every member is a worker and providing the structure in which this principle can flourish

- Seeing the Church as more than Sunday services but as an on-going, day-by-day permanent relationship expressed in seven-day-a-week service to the Master in the place, profession and situation in life he has placed you

- Dying to the egoism of personal kingdom-building and laying your gifts at the feet of the Master in the real work of the kingdom of God, which is making, maturing and mobilising disciples

- Building church through the cells as the miniature engine-rooms of the body of Christ

- Working in a spirit of interconnectedness and renouncing all aspects of independence in relation to membership and service in the body of Christ.

Only as we all take up these principles and work together in partnership with the Holy Spirit will we see the kind of effective Church emerge on the earth in advance of the Second Coming of

Christ which we describe in the next chapter, the final Part of this book.